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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8598
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 001644

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Off the Record, Journalists Predict Political Games to
Continue Into Spring

BISHKEK 00001644 001.2 OF 002

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Ref: Bishkek 1643

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In an off the record session with four of the most well-connected journalists in Bishkek, the Ambassador had a wide-ranging discussion on the state of post-protest Kyrgyzstan. The general opinion was that while the new constitution had provided both sides a face-saving compromise, the actual implementation of the document will lead to even more conflicts. The future status of state-owned television channel KTR will continue to be a difficult issue. The outcome of the protests and the restructuring of the checks and balances in the new constitution have politicians attempting to reconsolidate their power. Neither governmental nor independent media provided balanced and unbiased reporting about the protests said the journalists. End summary.

CONSTITUTION

¶2. (SBU) On Wednesday, November 15, the Ambassador met with four journalists: Dinara Suymalieva of Internews, Andrey Tsvetkov of NTS TV, Marat Tokoiev of the Journalists Public Association, and Anton Lymar of 24.kg. The journalists said that opposition politicians were not happy with the current rules of the political and economic games. The new constitution moved Kyrgyzstan away from the brink of a catastrophe, but political battles will continue into spring 2007, especially over the contradictions in the document and its implementation. The journalists described this as a very raw and very contradictory constitution, and they seemed remarkably sanguine that exactly a week after being signed, a final version has not yet been published.

¶3. (SBU) The journalists blamed President Bakiev for the way constitution was passed. They said that reforms had dragged on for a year and a half because he realized that the 2003 constitution was beneficial for his personal authority. They claimed that he was the main person blocking reforms. They claimed that the fact that

Bakiyev wants to maximize the benefits to himself under the old constitution before fully implementing the new constitution is another problem.

14. (SBU) Since no one has seen the final version of the constitution, the deputies themselves do not know what their rights and powers are. Some of the journalists said that Deputies had been coming to them looking for final copies of the constitution.

STATE TV

15. (SBU) The journalists said that reforming the state television channel KTR into a public broadcaster should continue to be the priority. Although President Bakiev vetoed the bill on reforms of the state TV, they were convinced the Parliament has enough votes (2/3 of 75) to overcome the veto or initiate a new and separate bill. According to the new constitution, KTR should now move under the control of the Prime Minister Felix Kulov, not the President. The journalists acknowledged that the bureaucratic shuffling of who controlled KTR was largely meaningless in addressing the larger problems in the Kyrgyz media environment since they did not believe the Prime Minister would take full advantage of his new authority and would defer to the President's wishes. The journalists said that the one-sided news coverage by KTR exacerbated already existing North-South divisions and increased tensions during the protests rather than calming them, because Northerners saw different (and broader) news coverage which the South did not have access to. One commented that a public television station broadcasting unbiased information would have helped deescalate the situation.

OTHER MEDIA

BISHKEK 00001644 002.2 OF 002

16. (SBU) All the journalists agreed that the coverage of the protests by other media was either censored (Pyramida TV and NTS were periodically cut off the air by "technical" issues, websites faced hacker attacks) or biased in favor of one side. One of the participants described how her television talk show had not been aired by NTS, a station owned by one of the opposition leaders, because the leader wanted only one-sided coverage. Another participant supported her saying that the owner of the station was personally directing the broadcast policy of the station during the crisis.

WHAT IS NEXT?

17. (SBU) The journalists believed that although the clash was between the President and the Parliament, it was the Prime Minister who emerged as the winner. Another byproduct of the protests was that political forces now realized that it is not always profitable to be the president. They theorized that some politicians would be taking a break till the 2010 elections. Some others are forging alliances with each other, leading to divisions forming within the Za Reformi movement. Others are already starting political parties to take advantage of the new proportional representation clauses in the new Constitution. Finally, they believe that Felix Kulov now understands that he has lost his followers among the opposition and sees Bakiyev as his only political ally.

18. (SBU) The journalists ended by commenting that it is a very bad precedent to change the Constitution with "street democracy." They see two large questions looming. First, how will the constitution be amended to remove contradictions unresolved during drafting: will it be in the Parliament or again on the streets. Second, the Parliament now has to consolidate its powers (comment: and determine exactly what those powers are) and show the President that it can appoint the Prime Minister and the cabinet.

Yovanovitch